

# The war in Ukraine: what solidarity is needed?

Friday 18 March 2022, by [BEAUDET Pierre](#) (Date first published: 2 March 2022).

**This text is intended to introduce a debate within [the Quebec-based solidarity movement] Alternatives. It argues that this conflict will change everything, including in our area of solidarity and international cooperation. As in any important debate, there are theories, strategic issues, choices to make in our practice. This text does not answer everything. It expresses a view that is not the only approach now being expressed. It will therefore be necessary to have a lengthy and in-depth discussion in the coming period, and this contribution will have achieved its objectives if it can simply break the ice.**

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Ukraine, with a population of 43 million, is foundering in the war unleashed by Russia's invasion. There are thousands of victims. A large part of the country's infrastructure, including energy and communications facilities, has been destroyed. In the streets of Kyiv and the other major cities, the Ukrainian people are engaged in street battles with the powerful Russian army. Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians have fled into exile.

Meanwhile, the United States and its allies are imposing severe sanctions against Russia while organizing major military assistance but without willing to become involved on the terrain. There does not appear to be any possibility of negotiation, at least in the short term. The conflicts will likely increase, with further destruction.

## The aggression

Russia prepared its attack over a long period. It was launched last week with the hawkish speech by President Vladimir Putin, who denied the very reality of Ukraine as the sovereign state and territory of a people with the right of self-determination. In the initial days, the Russian army destroyed with its short and long range missiles a major part of the military infrastructure as well as crucial energy and communications systems. Russia claimed it would spare civilians, which would exclude massive indiscriminate bombing. The Russian advances have continued, encountering as they reached the cities a strong Ukrainian resistance. In military terms, this resistance relies on small decentralized contingents with very effective weapons such as mobile anti-air and anti-tank missiles. It is also

getting unlimited support in weapons and money from the United States and its allies.

If the war becomes bogged down in the cities, it will result in destructive combat in the midst of highly-populated regions. The collateral costs will be huge, and this may lead the United States and NATO to become more involved. That is what Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is hoping, and in this he no doubt reflects the majority opinion that resistance to the aggression is the only outcome on offer. Russia, however, cannot easily back down, as this would be a terrible defeat for Vladimir Putin. So there is a great risk that the war will go on.

### **How did we get to this point?**

The implosion of the Soviet Union in 1989 profoundly destabilized what was then the second biggest power in the world. The vast majority of the republics that were part of the USSR broke free, including Ukraine which became independent in 1991.

Coming into office in the early 2000s, Vladimir Putin promised to be the “strong man” who would re-establish that power. First he focused on annihilating the Chechen rebellion. He turned then to what he defined as the “near exterior” including Georgia, Belarus and some republics in central Asia, combining threats and interventions with cooptation of local elites. This was relatively effective, and gave Putin the idea that he could expand his interventions, for example by supporting the regime of Bashar El-Assad in Syria, where he gambled on the weakening and failure of the US strategy. The “strong man” then followed this up with various measures to paralyze the opposition in Russia. Putin’s approach borrowed from the tradition of the USSR under Stalin in imposing a centralizing and repressive state along with attempts to carve out a place in the global arena.

### **Role of the United States**

Since the demise of the Soviet Union thirty years ago, Russia has continued to be confronted by Washington, beginning with the latter’s reneging on the promise made to Gorbachev, the last Soviet president, that it would not incorporate the former components and allies of the USSR into NATO. Instead, the US has built a veritable iron circle with several of these territories, threatening Russia indirectly. There were some limits to this strategy, so the United States launched the terrible “endless war” in the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as its incursion in the Balkans. But its failure after some years resulted in opening up areas of conflict in which Moscow was able to insert itself, in Syria, as mentioned, and with Iran and other countries anxious to avoid the destruction experienced by Iraq. Little by little, Russia could see its horizon broaden by looking to China and other “emerging” countries aspiring to greater autonomy within the global system. The Russia-China convergence is of course a product of the explicit US strategy that seeks to prevent China from moving into the lead in capitalist globalization.

### **A fight to the finish**

This gave Putin the impression that he could strike a major blow in Ukraine. When a staunchly anti-Russia government was imposed in 2014, Russia reacted by annexing the Sebastopol region and supporting the pro-Russia territories in eastern Ukraine. A “mini war” (with 14,000 victims, nonetheless) prepared the way for the present conflict. Demanding that the United States exclude any possibility of Ukraine membership in NATO, Putin was well aware that this issue was non-negotiable. Some European states (including Germany and France) had a more accommodating

position, but lacked the ability to say explicitly what could have been an alternative project: acceptance of a sovereign Ukraine with neutral status (as were Finland and Austria in the past), establishing of a new European agreement involving disarmament of borders, Russia's integration in the agreements, intra-European economies, etc. In the end, as Putin had expected, the US view prevailed.

### **Leap into the unknown**

Now that Russia has attacked, there is no turning back. Either Putin wins his bet by the subjugation of Ukraine, which would allow him to "entrust" to a new government the job of "re-establishing order." Or the situation will drag on into an endless conflict - unless Russia decides to wage war in the cities even if it means destroying them, with their people, as was done in Syria. In either case, the conditions will have been created to revive a new kind of cold war, fueled by fierce attacks on the Russian economy, increasing militarization of central Europe, the Baltic states and Poland, support to the Ukrainian resistance, etc.

This new Cold War 2.0 will represent an immense realignment of priorities and strategies. NATO, its relevance diminished in recent years, will return in force. The member states will be required to increase substantially their military spending and become directly involved in the strategy of counter-attacking and weakening Russia: harsh economic sanctions, military and political support of states and movements confronting Russia, a major "battle of ideas" to reinvent the monster that had created such fear in Western opinion for more than 30 years. And so on.

### **Consequences for Canada**

No doubt the Canadian government will follow the US line, as it has done since the beginning of the conflict. With the immense polar frontier between Canada and Russia, this could have major consequences. Canadians' reluctance to invest the billions needed for purchasing weapons of mass destruction will be seriously weakened, with a resulting surge in the military budget financed by severe cutbacks in other budget allocations. And Canada, eager to increase its oil and gas exports via huge pipeline projects to the Pacific and Atlantic, will be able to relaunch these projects on the pretext that they are part of the "war effort" against Russia. We will have to pay close attention to what is going to happen with the proposed LNG project designed to bring Alberta's gas through Quebec.

This Canadian shift will of course be strongly encouraged by pursuit of the war, which, we repeat, was initiated by Russia. Public opinion in Canada, and not only among Canadians of Ukrainian descent (1.8 million persons) has understandably mobilized against Russia.

### **On solidarity and international cooperation**

The area in which we are involved will be strongly affected. It is certain that humanitarian aid is going to be oriented towards the millions of Ukrainians who are in or on the way to exile. That is necessary, from a humanitarian standpoint. What is not is its discriminatory nature. There are at this point at least 10 million Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans (to mention only those) languishing in detention camps administered by states in the pay of NATO member countries. The great majority of these wretched of the earth know already that they will never be accepted as refugees. Meanwhile, some disregarded conflicts are breaking out in the Horn of Africa while the international (dis)order

prevents the UN from seriously intervening.

No one should be surprised, therefore, if the humanitarian aid (administered by Foreign Affairs Canada) is not sharply reorganized to assist Ukraine – which is not dishonorable but will become so if the already very modest resources offered to other countries and peoples in crisis are reduced.

In the coming period, the new board of directors of Alternatives, with other NGOs and international solidarity movements, will have to look at how we can promote our views and act responsibly in the eyes of a population that is currently distressed by the conflict and its possible consequences.

Among the options now being discussed in our circles, we will have to develop ourselves our basis of action taking into account past experience and the uncertainties in the present context.

- Peace must be re-established as soon as possible, if only in the form of a ceasefire that gives those responsible some time in which to extricate themselves from the present impasse.
- This peace process should include the United Nations. While the European Union and NATO are major protagonists, they cannot be left to tackle this.
- We act in solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance that aims to re-establish an inclusive and peaceful sovereignty without abuses of national minorities. Our solidarity can be exercised in the area of humanitarian assistance wherever in the country people are suffering the impact of the war.
- Humanitarian aid, and development assistance to poor countries (especially in Africa) must not be reduced to meet Ukraine's needs.
- Canada must not align its policies with those of the United States, via NATO or otherwise. It should promote disarmament and the peaceful resolution of conflicts while defending human rights without discrimination.

Russia invaded Ukraine four days ago in blatant violation of the UN Charter and international law. The United States and their NATO allies, including Canada, have plunged us as well increasingly into this war by a flurry of sanctions and outrageous statements.

[The text ends by announcing a demonstration in Montréal on March 6 in solidarity with an international day of action to protest both Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the expansion of NATO.]

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**Pierre Beaudet**

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**P.S.**

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